Engineers, Words, and Reading

by ***Ir. Oon Chee Kheng***

"FUR yers ego i cunt evan spel enginer, now i are one!" So declared the graffiti in the ground floor toilet of the School of Civil Engineering, University of New South Wales, my *alma mater*. I spotted it after having sat for the last paper of the course, a successful foray of which could arm me with that much sought-after title: Bachelor of Engineering.

The fact that the image of those words is still vivid in my mind speaks volume. Can engineers write? How are the engineers, when they have to deal with written words? We engineers are usually perceived as being more adept with numbers and drawings. Written words? No, not for us! Is it the case? And if so, must that be the case?

I remember once, reading a report produced by my *alma mater*. It said that graduates from its engineering schools are generally technically competent. However, engineers still need to convey and communicate their ideas to non engineers. Among others they have to write reports. In short, they must translate what are in their minds into, not only drawings, but also words. The words can either be oral or written. Unfortunately, it is in this area that most engineers fail to impress. That's why the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering then produced a booklet about writing reports and the use of Plain English for students. I brought it back when I left Australia. It was unfortunately lost over the years.

Related to this is the perception that engineers do not also read. Whether this perception needs to be, or can be, dispelled is a debatable point. I remember an incident at the counter of what used to be my favourite second hand bookshop in Bangsar (at that time when it started, it was at the back of a laundry shop!) When I pushed the stack of six-volume Everyman's Library edition of Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to the cashier cum bookshop owner, this caught the attention of what looked like a nice and cultured old gentleman in his sixties who was queuing behind me.

He asked what my occupation (perhaps I was young then, he did not ask for my "profession") was and I answered casually that I was an engineer. He looked completely surprised and disbelieved. I heard him muttering to himself, "Hm, hm, engineer reading Gibbon, engineer reading Gibbon!" It did not unfortunately occur to me then, to engage in a conversation with him. But his facial and verbal expression said it all. We engineers do not read as well. Reading and writing, the two are interlinked.

Paul Samuelson, the recently demised 1970 Nobel laureate in Economics, once wrote:

> *"You are not educated if you have never read a page of Malthus, Ricardo, Karl Marx, Henry George, Maynard Keynes – or, for that matter, J. K. Galbraith, Milton Friedman, Ralph Nader, James Tobin, and Robert Solow."*

Who are all these fellows? Karl Marx, eh, who is he? Is he a singer and the brother of Richard Marx of *Right Here Waiting* fame?

Samuelson is an economist, that's why the names he mentioned are all economists. He wrote this in 1973. If he were to write it today, he would perhaps include Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and others. If he were to extend to include non-economists, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said and other recent writers of repute come to mind. And of course he had completely left out thinkers and writers in our region in the East. The statement cannot be said to be a fair one. But, then, do engineers generally read beyond their equations and drawings, or in Samuelson's exaggerated words, are we "educated"?

This may be the wrong question to ask. Today's engineers do not only harbour mental exercises, he also brings them into realisation. In short, he responds to a need, a social need and fulfils his role in the process. Engineers have to write and read beyond their own discipline. In fulfilling his role, he has to think beyond his field and into the society at large. This society that he is to make better is ruled by sociological, economical, legal, philosophical, and even political factors. Being a part of this society, engineers have to be aware of these. And reading is an essential process, albeit not the only one, where an engineer can acquaint himself or herself with all these. It is thus not a choice. It is a necessity.

Back to the six-volume *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I had first intended to appreciate the beauty of the English language which Gibbon so adequately and masterly displayed. But I must confess that I did not go beyond the first volume. I settled later for an abridged coffee table version (in one volume!) with plenty of photographs and pictures to spice up the book. My excuse, if I were to give one, is easy to understand. No time! But, then, there are other books to read, you know! ■